

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK
MATHER POINT ORIENTATION/TRANSIT CENTER AND TRANSIT SYSTEM
PACKAGE 110E**

PROPOSED ACTION

The National Park Service proposes to implement a portion of the approved 1995 Final General Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (GMP) at Mather Point on the South Rim of Grand Canyon National Park, Coconino County, Arizona. The ultimate goal of this action is to remove day use parking from Grand Canyon Village, improve the visitor experience, and conserve resource values as detailed in the 1995 GMP. Only those environmental consequences associated with the Mather Point Center and transit system activities within the boundaries of Grand Canyon NP were analyzed.

A light rail passenger service would operate between a gateway facility located on U.S. Forest Service land just south of park boundaries near the community of Tusayan, and two locations within the park, the Mather Point center and Maswik. The U.S. Forest Service is currently in the process of completing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis on that portion of the transportation corridor between the Tusayan gateway facility and the park's southern boundary. In June, 1997, the U.S. Forest Service released a public review Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Tusayan Growth. The Tusayan gateway facility and the light rail transportation system between the Tusayan gateway facility and the park's southern boundary is an element of that draft EIS.

The National Park Service's proposed action includes constructing the Mather Point center, expanded bus service, dry dump vehicle maintenance yard, new access road from Center Road to the business center and campground, and realigned South Rim Road and East Rim Drive intersection. A 0.9-mile-long portion of the South Entrance Road from Mather Point to near the intersection of Yavapai Observation Station overlook will be removed. Most of this road will be restored to natural conditions, although a small portion will be used to expand the existing Mather Point overlook. Within the Grand Canyon Village, a fleet of alternatively fueled (natural gas, batteries, etc.) buses operating on several fixed routes will be used to provide visitor circulation within the Village. Both the light rail and the bus service will operate year-round.

All visitors to the Grand Canyon Village will park at the Tusayan gateway facility and ride the light rail system to access Mather Point or Maswik. Park buses providing point-to-point visitor transportation services will use the Maswik Transportation Center for pick-up and drop-off. Day use tour buses will not be allowed access to Mather Point or the village. Tour bus passengers will change over to the light rail system at Tusayan in order to visit Mather Point and all points to the west. Overnight guest vehicles will be allowed on specific park roads for the sole purpose of accessing their designated lodge parking area or campground.

A complete description of the proposal, environmental consequences, and mitigating actions are contained in the draft and final Environmental Assessments (EAs), Mather Point Orientation/Transit Center and Transit System, Grand Canyon National Park.

Copies of the draft and final EAs and this Finding Of No Significant impact (FONSI) are available at Grand Canyon NP.

PUBLIC REVIEW AND AVAILABILITY

The Draft Environmental Assessment (DEA), Mather Point Orientation/Transit Center and Transit System, made available for public review in March 1997, was released without a preferred alternative. The DEA described the National Park Service's proposal to construct the Mather Point orientation/transit center and transit system with its southern terminus at a gateway facility in Tusayan as described in the 1995 GMP. The DEA analyzed three transportation alternatives, ranging from buses to a light rail system, to implement a portion of the 1995 GMP. These transportation alternatives were developed in coordination with the work of the U.S. Forest Service and its partners on the 1997 Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Tusayan Growth.

The DEA was on formal public review for 30 days, from March 17, to April 16, 1997, and 59 letters of comment were received from governmental agencies, Indian Tribes, private businesses, and the public.

Commentors generally expressed a preference for light rail service and for no tour bus parking at Mather Point, and some commentors provided information to support their preference. Many supporters of light rail also expressed a preference of fuel sources other than diesel.

The Final Environmental Assessment (FEA) includes the National Park Service's proposed action to implement the Mather Point orientation/transit center and transit system. Development of the proposed action was supported with public comment of the DEA and the necessity to address pertinent visitor needs and management issues, and to conserve resource values.

Initially, the FEA had a 30-day public review period ending on August 15, 1997. A number of requests were received for an extension of the public review period; the review was extended to September 15, 1997. No public meetings or hearings were conducted; 20 letters were received. The original letters are on file at park headquarters, Grand Canyon National Park, and copies may be requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Public comments and NPS responses are attached to this FONSI.

WHY THE PROPOSED ACTION WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Biotic Communities: Approximately 97.4 acres of pinion/juniper and some Ponderosa pine habitat will be affected; however, some of the facilities will be constructed on previously disturbed areas (e.g., utility corridors, old roadbeds, burned areas). Approximately 1.7 acres of currently disturbed habitat will be restored leaving a net impact of 95.7 acres. Some habitat fragmentation will occur. Overall populations of affected species will be slightly and temporarily lowered during construction; however, once construction is completed and mitigation measures employed, population levels will be expected to recover to some degree. Additionally, landscaping and currently impacted areas that will be restored to natural conditions will provide new wildlife habitat. Minor short-term impacts on local water quality may occur during construction; however, measures will be taken to minimize impacts. No impacts on any special status species or critical habitats, floodplains, or wetlands will occur.

Air Quality: Implementation of a light rail system will have long-term benefits on air quality. The cleanest affordable fuel will be specified. Use of alternative fuel buses and elimination of private vehicles on the South Rim will have long-term beneficial impacts on air quality.

Noise: There will be an appreciable reduction in traffic noise from private vehicle traffic. Additionally, the long-term impacts on noise levels from implementation of a light rail system will be beneficial due to overall reduction in vehicular traffic.

Cultural Resources: The NPS has consulted with the Arizona State Historic Preservation Officer, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and Indian Tribes according to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. A memorandum of agreement that will address the identification, evaluation, and treatment of cultural resources in the area of potential effect will be developed as part of that consultation.

Visitor Experience: Over the short term, the visitor experience will be adversely affected by noise, dust, fumes, delays, and construction vehicle traffic for the duration of construction activities. Over the long term, the function of South Rim roads will be restored to the purpose of providing a safe, leisurely, and enjoyable route for relaxed sightseeing. By receiving orientation and interpretation early in their visit at the Mather Point orientation and transit center, visitors will be able to tailor their visit with their needs by choosing from a variety of transit routes leading to various park destinations. Summer visitors will experience less congestion than currently experienced. The light rail transportation cost for each visitor in the year 2000 will decrease in the year 2010, and the South Rim shuttle bus cost for each Visitor in the year 2000 will decrease in the year 2010. Overall impacts on the Visitor experience will be beneficial.

Scenic Values: There will be no adverse impacts although the Mather Point scenery will be changed. New facilities will blend with and complement existing environments and vistas. Building design and color scheme, plantings around the structures, and spatial orientation will all reduce the visibility and enhance the appearance of the structures. Views of the Grand Canyon will be enhanced over the long term. Views of Mather Point from the North Rim and from within the canyon will not be affected.

Traffic Management: Impacts on visitor traffic during construction will be mitigated by those actions described in the "Mitigation Measures" section of the draft assessment. Over the long term, traffic problems in the South Rim and Grand Canyon Village will be greatly reduced. Since the Grand Canyon Village will be closed to day use private automobile traffic year-round, the roads will be operating below their capacity, congestion will be abated considerably, and the South Rim road system will be expected to function at LOS B or better.

Park/Transit Operations: Park operations will be greatly improved. The roads will remain serviceable for several decades without major maintenance needs; time spent by park staff conducting road repairs will be reduced.

DETERMINATION

On the basis of the information contained in the DEA and FEA as summarized above, and mitigating measures to be employed, it is the determination of the National Park Service that the proposed project is not a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Nor is the proposed action without precedent or similar to one which normally requires an environmental impact statement. Therefore, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

APPROVED:

Robert Arnberger
Superintendent, Grand Canyon National Park

October 22, 1997
Date